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# THE STOIC CONCEPT OF EVIL<sup>1</sup>

BY A. A. LONG

The adjective 'stoical' denotes an attitude of mind which has, as its characteristic, hardness and uncomplaining endurance of physical and mental suffering. 'Stoical' gets this meaning chiefly because the Greek philosophical school established in the Stoa at Athens denied pain, whether physical or mental, to be *kakon* (the adjective most frequently used in Classical Greek to denote a con-attitude to anything). At first glance this proposition appears paradoxical. Painful sensations are generally unambiguous with respect to their painfulness. To say that someone has a pain is to say that he is aware of something which is hurting him. Most of us dislike such experiences, irrespective of their cause, and we also dislike and may be pained by the sufferings of others. If physical pain is inflicted gratuitously we may make moral judgments on its perpetrators. Not all of us are satisfied by beliefs in the remedial or educational efficacy of pain as a necessary means to a good end.

The founders of Stoicism would not, I think, have quarrelled with much in these remarks. Pain is an empirical fact and they denied neither its physical effects nor its unpleasantness.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is because their attitude to pain purported to be realistic that they refused to call it bad (*kakon*).<sup>3</sup> By the same token, absence of pain or external prosperity was not good (*agathon* or *kalon*). Of course, the latter condition is preferable to the former, but neither in itself is of the slightest moral significance.<sup>4</sup> We do not praise men for being healthy or blame the sick where the healthy are naturally sound in body and the sick have contracted an unavoidable disease. To call pain an evil in normal situations is not to make a moral judgment. The Stoics disliked linguistic ambiguity and in their strict statements reserved the terms *agathon* and *kakon* for descriptions of moral character and action. In this they were clearly trying to behave not paradoxically but realistically. Their argument may perhaps be summed up thus:—'Pain is

<sup>1</sup>The term 'evil' is used here as the nearest single English term available for the range of problematic notions discussed in this article, but what it describes in Stoicism will be seen to be different from some of its normal English connotations. By 'Stoics' I mean primarily Chrysippus and his immediate predecessors. Chrysippus is the standard of reference for orthodox Stoicism, and most of our Greek sources for early Stoicism report his views. While he differed from Zeno and Cleanthes over various particular arguments, it is not generally possible or profitable to distinguish major points of difference in moral philosophy. Most of my references are to von Arnim's *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* (= *SVF*), vols. 1-3.

<sup>2</sup>See Stobaeus, *SVF* 3, 574; Seneca, *Ep. Mor.* 9, 3.

<sup>3</sup>See Cicero, *De Fin.* 3, 29; Seneca, *Ep. Mor.* 85, 30.

<sup>4</sup>On the Stoic concept of "indifferents" and scale of "value" see my article, "Carneades and the Stoic Telos", *Phronesis* 12, 1, (1967), 65-7.

a fact with which men have to come to terms. Let us by all means condemn those who inflict it but let us not make matters worse by transferring our moral language to the pain itself. It will not alleviate the pain. To realise that it is a necessary, though undesirable, feature of the human situation may do so. At least, if we desire to be happy all the time (and most of us do), a source of happiness in spite of pain is needed. Having reformed the language we know that pain and moral goodness (*kalon*) are not contradictory but categorically different. If moral goodness is the sole source of happiness its permanence need not be undermined by pain.<sup>5</sup> Only when pain becomes entirely unbearable are we in danger of confusing the moral and physical conditions. Then suicide may be the answer.<sup>6</sup>

This, I hope, may fairly be taken as a summary reconstruction of the Stoic attitude to pain. Of course, there are immensely complex refinements and the treatment of mental/emotional suffering is a large and independent subject. But the elimination of painful sensations from the moral sphere is basic. Since the cardinal Stoic teaching on goodness is relatively familiar I will consider it here only as it concerns the problem of evil. Evil, though often defined simply as the contrary of good, presents many problems of its own. I believe these have not been properly charted and that they are philosophically interesting. Some misconceptions need resolution and the perspective of the question requires definition.

## I

There are three basic and inter-related questions : what evil is, how it exists and why it exists. These were clearly questions which exercised the Stoics considerably, and many books bearing on the subject were written. It is possible that they had no completely definite answers to all of them. Galen reports that Chrysippus was at a loss (*aporia*) to explain the causes of evil and how wrongdoing comes about (*SVF* 3, 229a). This is unfair and probably due to the bias of Posidonius, who thought he had an answer by calling in Platonic psychology.<sup>7</sup> But that meant a departure in fundamentals, and I shall not discuss it here. However, Plutarch, whose *De Stoicorum Repugnantiis* is our most reliable and informative source, does quote admitted doubts by Chrysippus concerning the reconciliation of providence and undeserved suffering (1051c). The passage raises a difficulty, which may be a red-herring, and as it bears on the question 'what evil is', I will consider it now.

Plutarch wants to show that Chrysippus is inconsistent in "finding no fault with the universe since all is arranged according to the best nature",

<sup>5</sup>See Diogenes Laertius, *SVF*, 3, 49; Stobaeus, *ibid.* 106; Epictetus, 1, 4, 1-4.

<sup>6</sup>See Cicero, *SVF* 3, 763; Plutarch, *Comm. Not.* 1064c. The death-bed recantation of Dionysius of Heraclea, when he was racked by pain, pointed the practical difficulty of the Stoic position.

<sup>7</sup>For Posidonius' polemic against Chrysippus' psychological monism see Galen, *SVF* 3, 461 ff., and M. Pohlenz, "Zenon und Chrysipp", *Nachricht. von der Gesell. der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen* (1938), 187-199.

and then writing in his third book on *Ousia* that good men sometimes suffer severe deprivations which demand condemnation. "Is it the case", writes Chrysippus, "that certain men are neglected just as in large houses some husks and grain go astray, although the estate is well-managed? Or is it because evil daimons are in control in cases where there actually are instances of such culpable neglect?" Plutarch adds that Chrysippus also made the *mixture of necessity* responsible.

Now, omitting for the moment the type of explanation which Chrysippus gave, we can see clearly that he is trying to explain why the good suffer. Suffer what? The precise sense of 'culpable neglect' cannot be determined; it is hard not to see it as a reference to "evil" circumstances. But these should be indifferent to the good man and therefore in no need of justification. Otherwise we commit the mistake of confusing moral and non-moral situations.

If we stopped there we should have misunderstood the problem. My pain is indifferent to me, but that does not make your causing my pain indifferent. The agent in Plutarch's passage is God, the efficient cause pervading all things. And the problem is how to reconcile his providence with undeserved sufferings attributable to no human agent. To the individual sufferer, if he is a true Stoic, they are indifferent, but can God be saved from blame?

Too little is known of Stoic demonology to speculate about Chrysippus' explanation on that score, but recourse to necessity and the sufferings of the part for the good of the whole are common in Stoic thought. They crop up in two identical quotations from Chrysippus' work "On Nature" in Plutarch:<sup>8</sup>

The evil (*kakia*) which occurs in terrible disasters has a principle (*logos*) peculiar to itself; for in a sense it too occurs in accordance with universal reason and, so to speak, is not without usefulness in relation to the whole. For *without it* there could be no good.

Plutarch and others take this argument to be asserting the necessary conjunction of contraries; if so it is a bad one, since it makes a particular situation depend upon its having a contrary as if that fact in itself determined what the situation is as distinct from what we call it. Chrysippus, in discussing moral badness, certainly did use such an argument, asserting that for there to be virtue there must also be vice;<sup>9</sup> but I am not convinced that he is using it here: to find out what he is arguing, we need to know the meaning of *kakia* having a *logos* and being useful in relation to the whole.

We find anthropological arguments, such as the value of divinely-motivated wars in reducing over-population, and the old-fashioned notion that plague and famine punish the wicked.<sup>10</sup> But the standard explanation makes use of an optimistic teleology. At this point a brief excursion into physics and theology is necessary, for Chrysippus stipulated that good and

<sup>8</sup>Plutarch, *Comm. Not.* 1065b; *De Stoic. Rep.* 1050f.

<sup>9</sup>See Aulus Gellius, *SVF* 2, 1169-70.

<sup>10</sup>See Plutarch, *De Stoic. Rep.* 1040c, 1049b.

evil can only be analysed in reference to universal nature (*koine physis*).<sup>11</sup>

Like Aristotle, the Stoics saw evidence of purpose in the regularity of natural phenomena and organic life, but unlike Aristotle they attributed its cause to the conscious agency of God. Nature is not an unconscious final cause, accounting for the efforts of the individual organism to perfect itself, but matter informed by a rational efficient cause, God, who permeates all things in virtue of the *pneuma* they contain.<sup>12</sup> Aristotle had kept God out of the world and thereby obscured the relationship between purpose and the self-absorbed unmoved mover. The Stoics identify God with the world, treating matter (*hyle*) as his body and *to poioun* as his *psyche*. As the human soul extends throughout the human body, so the moving principle in the world extends throughout its matter, endowing it with definite quality by variations of tension.

It is easy to regard this pantheistic theory as naive, but to do so overlooks the problems it sets out to solve. Stoic *pneuma* is an attempt to give a causal explanation of all events by making them stages in the history of a single, rational, continuously changing substance. In this sense it refers the question 'What purpose?' or 'Whose purpose?' to the dynamic force responsible collectively for the arrangement of all elements in the world. The Stoics avoided Aristotle's problem of an unmoved mover and its attractive force by materializing the force itself, and they had his "heavenly intelligences" and Plato's "world-soul" as models when they endowed this force with consciousness. In order to be purposive the force had to be rational and the benevolence of the purpose and the perfection of the force were deduced by the argument from design, the ontological argument and various others. *Pneuma* in a cosmic sense is a conscious, rational, material force, working like a craftsman on inert, formless matter and fashioning different substances by variations of its own tension.<sup>13</sup>

God then, thus materialized, pervades all things, but the mere possession of *pneuma* does not endow a substance with organic life. The parts of the whole are immensely varied, and the *pneuma* which endows a stone with coherence (*hexis*), or a plant with *physis*, is quite different from that which informs the human *psyche*.<sup>14</sup> The stone possesses a cohesive force, which under different conditions might bestow consciousness on an animal but even now forms part of the universal, pervading consciousness of God. In short, God knows the world because he pervades the body of the world in the form of a fine, elastic, moving principle. He is thus the sum of all events, identical individually with none, but embracing all in a causal nexus determined by his own volition. Because God is rational he has planned the world, because he is the primary cause he has created the world, because

<sup>11</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 1035c, etc.

<sup>12</sup>On Stoic *pneuma*, which is a blending of fine air and fire, see S. Sambursky, *The Physics of the Stoics* (London 1959), pp. 1-48.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. *SVF* 2, 310; 447; 1027.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. *SVF* 2, 714-6.

he is perfect he has arranged the parts for the good of the whole, and because he is eternal and immanent in everything he has foreknowledge of all events.

If this is a fair summary of the physical basis of Stoic theology it shows why ethical questions must start from a knowledge of universal *physis*. From God's eternal viewpoint all events are causally related in a uniform whole. He is concerned with all time, with the aggregate rather than the individual. Human action apart, God is *directly* responsible for all events. Disease and disaster are not the object of his plan but an unavoidable consequence of the good things which are.<sup>15</sup> We are not then asserting the necessary conjunction of contraries, but the necessity of consequence—what must be if there is to be “good”: e.g., fragility is a necessary consequence of the brain's complex structure as the instrument of reason.<sup>16</sup> The Stoic sees sufficient evidence of a benevolently ordered world to accept cosmic evil as something which eventually, if not now, will prove to have been useful to the whole.<sup>17</sup> Events outside his control are accepted as part of the plan. They merit condemnation only when the results of bad intentions and God's intentions are necessarily good.

So cosmic evil turns out after all to be a red herring. When the Stoics use *kakia* in this way I take it as a concession to everyday usage and therefore not inconsistent with the assertion that “moral badness is the only *kakon*”.<sup>18</sup> It is a description of events too terrible to be condoned by recourse to technical expedients, but not attributable to God's plan in and for themselves. God by definition causes only good, but this is a good which requires reference to all time. When the Stoics asserted that moral badness was the only *kakon* they were not overlooking natural disasters or disease, nor were they attributing moral badness to God. If moral badness is the only *kakon*, and something foreign to God's nature, cosmic *kakia* turns out to be only a human description of events necessary for the realization of good on the universal scale.

Before turning to *kakia* proper, moral badness, it is worth seeing how far this analysis accords with modern interpretations. Pohlenz takes refuge in logical necessity and “the existence of matter which set firm limits to the divine purpose”;<sup>19</sup> Hicks denies the possibility of making any power “external to the godhead” responsible, like necessity, and points to passages

<sup>15</sup>A. Gellius, *SVF* 2, 1170. *Incommoda . . . non per naturam, sed per sequellas quasdam necessarias facta dicit Chrysippus (following the text of Hosius).*

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>Since God embraces all nature nothing exists to obstruct his purposes, though individual things may encounter obstruction (Cicero, *De Nat. Deorum* 2, 35-7). It is inferred then that what happens “is concerned with the preservation of the whole” (Seneca, *Ep. Mor.* 74, 20); that “evils” are by-products of good (Marcus Aurelius, 6, 36), whether planned deliberately (δρμήσαντα) or accompaniments (κατ' ἐπακολούθησιν) of such planning.

<sup>18</sup>So Chrysippus permits “health” and “wealth”, etc., which are strictly “indifferent” in terms of moral status, to be called “good” and their opposites “bad”, provided it is made clear that this is only a use of popular terminology. Plutarch, *De Stoic. Rep.* 30; cf. Cicero, *De Fin.* 3, 52.

<sup>19</sup>*Die Stoa* I (3rd ed., Göttingen, 1964), p. 100.

which stress the parts being organized for the good of the whole.<sup>20</sup> Edelstein, in a recent book, finds “no evidence that events are directed by Providence to realize worthy purposes; rather is the world a brute fact”.<sup>21</sup> All these views are partly right, but none gets to the essence of the Stoic explanation. They certainly took the world as it is, but they also thought it was benevolently ordered for man.<sup>22</sup> They did appeal to necessity but there is little evidence for thinking they regarded matter as in any way intractable.<sup>23</sup> When the Stoics spoke of the “usefulness of cosmic evil in relation to the whole” they were clearly putting divine and human perspectives into different categories.<sup>24</sup> Basic to this kind of explanation is the eternity of God. Cosmic *kakia* is a necessary consequence of the divine plan for good. Hence it must not be confused, any more than pain, with moral *kakia*, the failure to act according to “right reason” (*orthos logos*).<sup>25</sup> The principle and usefulness of cosmic *kakia* is not intrinsic but referable to the ultimate good end which it subserves.

## II

I said just now that moral evil is manifested in “behaviour contrary to *orthos logos*”. It is also defined by Plutarch as *logos hemartemenos*.<sup>26</sup> Our next task is an analysis of the meaning of these terms.

*Orthos logos* is defined as ‘moral goodness’, ‘universal law’, ‘natural law prescribing what should and should not be done’, ‘that in accordance with which the wise man always acts’, and other variants of these.<sup>27</sup> The basic notion is ‘law’, ‘rule’ or ‘principle’. This is simple enough. What complicates things is the fact that “the law” and those who prescribe and obey it are not distinguished.<sup>28</sup> God is *orthos logos* and *orthos logos* is also a description of the wise man’s state of mind. In this sense it means ‘reason’ rather than ‘law’. But of course in the moral sphere the function of reason is the formulation of imperatives, laws of behaviour, and this is what the Stoics seem to have meant in identifying the state of the good man’s *logos* with universal law. His *logos* is the moral principle determining his behaviour, and it is a universal law because the good man is not inferior to God and therefore his *logos* is an instance of *orthos logos* in the larger sense.<sup>29</sup> The relation here between the subjective content of the moral act and its objective

<sup>20</sup>*Stoic and Epicurean* (London, 1910), p. 42.

<sup>21</sup>*The Meaning of Stoicism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), pp. 8, 32-4.

<sup>22</sup>See Cicero, *De Nat. Deorum*, 2, 133-167.

<sup>23</sup>Cf. *ibid.* 3, 92. *Materiam enim rerum, ex qua et in qua omnia sint, totam esse flexibilem et commutabilem, ut nihil sit quod non ea quamvis subito fingi convertique possit*; Seneca, *Ep. Mor.* 65, 2. The counter-evidence cited by Pohlenz is at best equivocal.

<sup>24</sup>See Cleanthes, *Hymn to Zeus*, 14-21.

<sup>25</sup>See Clement, *SVF* 3, 445, Stobaeus, *ibid.*, 500.

<sup>26</sup>*De Stoic. Rep.* 1042c.

<sup>27</sup>Seneca, *SVF* 3, 200a; Cicero, *ibid.*, 315; Diogenes Laertius, *SVF* 1, 162; Stobaeus, *SVF* 3, 560.

<sup>28</sup>There is a similar problem in Aristotle, from whom the Stoics have borrowed the concept; see Joachim’s Commentary to *Nic. Eth.* 1138b 34 ff.

<sup>29</sup>See Plutarch, *De Stoic. Rep.* 1038d; Epictetus, 1, 12, 26f.



necessity is very similar to that expressed in Kant's categorical imperative. For the Stoics as for Kant it is the "good will" which bestows moral worth on an action, but by 'will' or 'wish' the Stoics did not mean a specific mental faculty which is the supreme good in itself, but a disposition to choose those actions which experience of the world shows to be in accordance with nature.<sup>30</sup>

Moral action then is consistent adherence to the principles which the good man's reason prescribes to him, and such principles are valid as laws of nature. The good man becomes the criterion, not "reason" in general, because all men are rational, and some men are morally bad. The Stoics were as aware as Aristotle that the doctor is potentially the best poisoner and that the mere possession of *logos* is no proof of virtue. They also argued that *kakia* in the strict moral sense is indemonstrable outside man. The possession of *logos* is man's distinguishing characteristic; good and evil must therefore be definable in terms of the kind of *logos* which a man has. As we have already seen, there is no question of any kind of evil principle at work in the world outside man. God causes only good. But the human *psyche* is such that it can manifest good or evil, according to the disposition of its rational part.<sup>31</sup> Here again the influence of Aristotle is strong. The Stoics follow Aristotle in holding that whatever has the capacity of being otherwise than it is has the capacity of receiving contrary predicates. If a man can be virtuous he can also be vicious; and they go further than Aristotle in the part assigned to Nature in the realization of virtue. Nature not only gives men the capacity of being good, it also *leads* men toward goodness, and goodness is the *perfection* of the individual human being's nature.<sup>32</sup> Hence the *natural* condition of human *logos* is *orthos*, and evil is acting contrary to this nature.

How did the Stoics establish these propositions? We can get some idea from passages in Cicero and Seneca.<sup>33</sup> Nature, it is argued, displays a harmonious arrangement of parts. The objects of instinctive choice, which is directed to self-preservation, though natural, have no value in isolation and the maturing human *logos* naturally finds the *concordia rerum agendarum* a worthier object than its parts. By analogy with the harmony manifest in the world at large the mature *logos* intuitively has an idea of moral good, that is, a life in which every event is harmoniously related by the control of reason. As Cicero, contrasting human and animal nature, puts it (*De Off.* 1, 11): *Homo autem, quod rationis est particeps, per quam consequentia cernit, causas rerum videt, earumque progressus, et quasi antecessiones non ignorat, similitudines comparat, rebusque praesentibus adiungit atque annectit futuras: facile totius vitae cursum videt, ad eamque degendam praeparat res necessarias.*

*Facile* is all very well in principle, but the Stoics knew that the majority

<sup>30</sup>See Cicero, *SVF* 3, 438 and *Phronesis* 12 (1967), 63 f.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Plutarch, *SVF* 3, 459.

<sup>32</sup>See Diogenes Laertius, *SVF* 1, 179; Galen, *SVF* 3, 257.

<sup>33</sup>Cicero, *De Fin.* 3, 20 ff.; Seneca, *Ep. Mor.* 49, 11; 120, 4.



of men do not live such a life. If *it* is natural the question arises why *they* live unnaturally. We have to distinguish, I think, between natural and normal. In calling virtue a life in accordance with nature and regarding this as natural to man the Stoics did not mean that it is regularly realized. Nor, I think, were they simply confusing what is the case with what ought to be the case. The moral life is natural in this sense : nature herself gives man an *imperfecta ratio* which unless it is prevented or corrupted by external forces will lead him to the correct concept of good.<sup>34</sup> The innate *physis* is no source of corruption ; nor for that matter is it the source of goodness, but it naturally conducts a man to a state in which he can acquire goodness by his own efforts. Since virtue and vice are dispositions of the human *logos* the Stoics had to account for the causes of the *logos* becoming morally bad. I will consider first their explanations of the sources of corruption and then the physical and psychological implications of these.

The sources of corruption are set firmly in the environment. Diogenes Laertius (7, 89) summarizes them briefly as “ the persuasiveness of external things ” and “ communication with acquaintances ”. A detailed expansion of these is given in Chalcidius’s commentary to Plato’s *Timaeus*, a passage which is corroborated by other reliable sources :<sup>35</sup> Chalcidius is explaining that moral evil in Stoic theory is not deliberately chosen for its own sake but occurs as a result of “ errors of judgment concerning good and evil ”. He goes on to discuss the “ double source of corruption ” (*duplex perversio*) mentioned by Diogenes. First, we get errors produced by events themselves. The process of birth is attended by pain, and obstetric treatment restores the new-born creature to the state it enjoyed in the womb. *Ergo ex utroque sensu, tam doloris quam delectationis, opinio quaedam naturalis exoritur, omne suave ac delectabile bonum, contraque quod dolorem adferat malum esse atque vitandum*. These opinions persist into maturity so that riches are esteemed as the supreme *instrumentum voluptatis*, and *gloria* is preferred to *honor*. In popular esteem these two external goals are treated as the *summum bonum*.

Such are the errors arising from events, the experience of pain and its removal. By parents, teachers, poets, painters, who set “ wealth ” etc. as the goal, children are provided with false conceptions of good. (These references to corrupting environment, it should be noted, are intended as explanations and not excuses.)

Galen complains that if pleasure is not a good nor pain an evil our senses would not make reports which the Stoics themselves admit do “ induce ” such conclusions.<sup>36</sup> The Stoics would presumably answer that Galen is confusing sensation with judgment. The young child takes physical well-being as his criterion because he has nothing else to take. If in maturity

<sup>34</sup>Seneca, *SVF* 3, 219, cf. *Phronesis* 12 (1967), 63 f. For Posidonius’ dissatisfaction with this explanation and his solution in terms of innate evil tendencies see Galen *De Plac*, 438.12 - 452.10 (Müller). Other Stoics recognized that heredity plays a part in character formation.

<sup>35</sup>*SVF* 3, 229-236.

<sup>36</sup>*SVF* 3, 229a. Cf. the critique of Plotinus *Enn.* I 4, 2, 38-46.

we make sources of pleasure and pain morally significant we are continuing to take sensation as our criterion and employing *logos* not for its own sake but purely as the servant of physical well-being. The fact that this is not the role of *logos* is proved by reference to animals and young children who are able to further these ends perfectly well without it.<sup>37</sup>

Evil then is a matter of misjudgment. What is involved here? The Stoics argue that all action is *prompted* by, I do not yet say *caused* by, a *horme*, a "drive" or "impulse".<sup>38</sup> The physical description of this is "a movement of soul towards or away from something", and it is defined as "reason (*logos*) commanding a man to act".<sup>39</sup> The resemblance of this definition, which treats *horme* as an imperative, with the language describing *orthos logos* is striking and, as we shall see, not coincidental. The difference between *horme* and *orthos logos* lies in the modal difference between *poiein* and *poieteon*.<sup>40</sup> *Horme* prompts action but right action only if the *logos* in which it is embodied is *orthos*.

Can we control our *hormai*, which I will now translate by "impulses"? The Stoic answer is unequivocally affirmative, except in cases of chronic sickness. The child's impulse is a primary biological drive, but in maturity impulses are not causes of behaviour unless we make them such, and we do this by *assenting* to or withholding *assent* from presentations and propositions.<sup>41</sup> There is no question here of a hidden spring of action. An impulse is a fully articulated command, caused by something internal or external which secures or has secured in the past our assent. It is not an intention or decision but the mental faculty (*dynamis*) which translates intentions and decisions into action.<sup>42</sup> Something is presented to the mind: we assent to it and thereby give ourselves an imperative to act in a certain way.

The problem of the criterion of true and false propositions need not concern us now. Of immediate relevance is the concept of *assent*, for it is by assenting to false propositions that bad dispositions are formed. 'Pain is an evil' is a false proposition. A man is told that it is true. He assents and thus issues himself with an imperative to avoid pain. By assenting he also implants an idea of the proposition, and this or a corresponding sense-impression may both alike serve as impulses of his actions if he continues to assent to them.

The function of impulse as a verbalized imperative has been overlooked, and this has led to misinterpretation of the Stoic theory of moral judgment. There is some excuse for misunderstanding, since one of the concepts *impulse/assent* can easily appear redundant.

'All impulses are assents'; 'impulse does not occur without assent'; 'impressions do not create an impulse which issues in action without

<sup>37</sup>Cf. Cicero, *De Fin.* 3, 16 ff.; Epictetus, 1, 6, 12-22.

<sup>38</sup>Alexander Aphr. *SVF* 2, 980; Seneca, *SVF* 3, 307.

<sup>39</sup>Plutarch, *SVF* 3, 175; Clement, *ibid.* 377.

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Alexander, *SVF* 2, 1003.

<sup>41</sup>See Sextus, *SVF* 2, 91; Stobaeus, *SVF* 3, 171; Diogenes Laertius, 7, 86.

<sup>42</sup>Cf. Iamblichus, *SVF* 2, 826 and see Pohlenz, *Die Stoa* II, note to p. 89.

assent'.<sup>43</sup> From these propositions it appears to follow that *impulse* entails *assent*. This would be very odd if impulse preceded assent, as we should expect to be the case, for assent should be a power to decline what is presented to it. In fact, the impulse here referred to and assent must constitute a single, synchronous process, directly analogous to Aristotle's *deliberated desire*.<sup>44</sup> They do not constitute an explanation of moral conflict, at least in the orthodox Stoicism represented by Chrysippus.<sup>45</sup> Until Posidonius divided the soul into Platonic parts and Panaetius included irrational impulses the Stoics did not admit that the mind could be split by conflicting desires. *Impulse* entails *assent* because all acts of assent are the issue of an imperative, not because we assent to all our impulses. Chrysippus' wise man does not experience conflicting imperatives since the moral state of his *logos* (and this goes for other men too) is single at any one time.<sup>46</sup> The bad man, by assenting inconsistently, might possess conflicting beliefs, but his conduct would be determined not by internal debate but by the assents constituting his stronger beliefs. The *logos* could not issue an imperative, say to avoid this pain, and enable us instantly to decline it. Impulses are not candidates for assent but the results of assent, since both are functions of the unified *logos*.

I mentioned earlier that we assent to propositions and presentations. But these cannot include propositions already established in the disposition. For these are beliefs or knowledge and beliefs or knowledge are not objects for assent but assents to the truth of propositions. Since internal imperatives are ruled out as objects for assent we are left with impressions and propositions which reach the mind from outside. The *logos* will not (at least without difficulty) accept a proposition contrary to its disposition. If it is informed or reminded of such a proposition by sense-impressions or thought it will not (normally) translate the mechanical reaction constituting the presentation into action. It will assent to the contrary proposition and thereby issue itself with an imperative to act accordingly. It seems clear that the Stoics distinguished the mechanical reaction of the sense organs to external phenomena, which could be declined or accepted, from *practical impulse*, the internal imperative which always leads to action since it is synchronous with assent.<sup>47</sup> The fact that the state of the *logos* determines what we assent to does not mean that the *logos* is itself determined by external causes. Our characters are what we have chosen to make them by

<sup>43</sup>Stobaeus, *loc. cit.*; Plutarch, *SVF* 3, 177; Cicero, *SVF* 2, 116.

<sup>44</sup>See especially *Nic. Eth.* 6, 2. For Aristotle thought (λόγος) and desire (δρεσις) are the two constituents of moral choice (προαίρεσις). Joachim (commentary *ad loc.*) argues convincingly that for Aristotle it is the congruence of thought and impulse which individualizes the *logos*: we are moved to do *this* because we recognize it as an act which our general principle tells us will serve as means to our desiderated end.

<sup>45</sup>In the psychology of Chrysippus (though possibly not in Zeno and Cleanthes) a man is not pulled by his passions in one direction and by his reason in another. His passions are false judgments that such and such is a good or an evil; see Galen, *SVF* 3, 463 etc. With the passage of time and a change of external situation (*SVF* 3, 466 ff.) these judgments might alter, but this would require an alteration of the whole *logos*.

<sup>46</sup>Plutarch, *SVF* 3, 459; Galen, *SVF* 3, 471a.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Cicero, *De Fato*, 42; *Ac. Post.* 40-41.

our use of assent. The Stoics greatly oversimplified the complexity of mental operations, but they also thought like Aristotle that the repeated patterns of behaviour which *form* our dispositions are voluntarily chosen.

I conclude then that assent is not a matter of the *logos* accepting internal imperatives which it could not decline anyway, but the *logos* issuing an imperative to do whatever is entailed in its acceptance of some external situation as a valid state of affairs.<sup>48</sup> Assent and impulse cannot therefore conflict, since the assent to a proposition commending *x* has the necessary consequence of ordering us to pursue *x*. If this is correct and *horme* (impulse) is an imperative followed immediately by action, it could seem as if the Stoics have confused moral judgments and the causes of action.<sup>49</sup> I have already hinted that this is not so, but the exact answer needs reference to their causal theory and account of freewill.

### III

It is generally agreed that the Stoics were in some sense determinists, but whether they identified causal explicability and unavoidability is not, I think, quite clear. They certainly claimed that all events are causally related, and since the cosmos is eternal and repeats itself in an identical fashion it seems certain that from God's viewpoint "what will be was to be". The perspectives of eternal and temporal are as relevant here as they are to the problem of cosmic evil. But it is not correct to call the Stoics just "fatalists" or to suppose that they envisaged a chain of causes which excluded human decisions or included them as merely necessary reactions to irreversible processes. Man is himself a cause within the causal nexus. He consciously determines (*qua* the *logos* which is his as well as God's) what will happen, as well as being in some sense determined by what has happened.<sup>50</sup>

How does man determine events? Alexander, the Aristotelian commentator, is our starting-point: "Since those things which happen by the agency of an animal could not happen otherwise than by its impulse, and do happen as a result of its assent and impulse, such things are in the power of animals; but they happen of necessity since they cannot happen otherwise than by this means".<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere Alexander talks of "fated events" occurring through (*dia*) the power of animals, in accordance with their impulse.<sup>52</sup> These are difficult passages. Alexander appears to be talking not just about men, though it is very doubtful whether the Stoics thought that animals in general had a power to assent or not of the kind we have been discussing. His own comment on the theory he reports is contemptuous: "the Stoics

<sup>48</sup>This conclusion is supported by Cicero, *Ac. Pr.* 25; *illud autem quod movet* (sc. *appetitionem*, 'impulse') *prius oportet videri, eique credi, quod fieri non potest si id quod visum erit discerni non poterit a falso*. So too Plutarch (*SVF* 3, 384) where it is shown that impulses follow from judgments.

<sup>49</sup>For the problem in general see Hare, *The Language of Morals*, pp. 12 ff.

<sup>50</sup>Statements such as 'all events happen in accordance with universal nature' (*SVF* 2, 937) do not tell against this. Anything a man does is in the cosmic sense "a natural event", but *pneuma*, the universal causal principle, is inside as well as outside him. *Pneuma* is the universal causal principle because it is the material in virtue of which a man does what he does, a stone is what it is, etc.

<sup>51</sup>*SVF* 2, 980.

<sup>52</sup>*SVF* 2, 1000.

have removed freedom of choice and action by equating 'in our power' with 'through our power', that is to say, impulse and assent are only means for transmitting a predestined effect.<sup>53</sup> But Alexander misrepresents the role of assent. Whether or not this gets the Stoics out of the problem is a very difficult question, but Chrysippus clearly intended it to do so.

The concept of assent is only significant if assent can be withheld as well as given. Nothing suggests that the Stoics thought assent in the moral sense was necessarily determined by external causes.<sup>54</sup> They certainly held that external events restrict the options open to a man, but for his reaction to events and the intentions which he forms in consequence his disposition is answerable. If you push a cylinder down a hill it will roll, but how it rolls depends upon its shape. In this famous illustration it is the properties of the cylinder which are entitled "principal and perfect causes"; the push is "an auxiliary and antecedent cause".<sup>55</sup> The application to human action is clear: one must react to the external world and its constraints, but how one reacts depends upon oneself. For reaction here we may substitute *assent*. In assenting or withholding assent the Stoic is allowing or refusing to allow a sense-impression or proposition to serve as the antecedent cause of his actions; he cannot decline receipt of impressions, but only his act of assent can turn them into actual antecedent causes of what he subsequently does. The necessary cause is the act of assent. All events are causally connected and assent connects an external cause with an internal effect. We learn from Clement of Alexandria that the Stoics distinguished "a connecting cause" which fits the role played by assent; it is defined as "a cause such that if it is present the effect holds and if it is absent the effect does not occur".<sup>56</sup> The "connecting cause" links some potential cause which is available with an effect. A sense impression may be a cause of action, but only assent can turn it into an actual "antecedent or auxiliary cause".

The effect on the mind of its assent to an antecedent cause is the release of a faculty to act in a certain way and this reaches consciousness in the form of an imperative. This imperative or impulse is not a cause of action in itself but the name of the mental process by which intentions are translated into actions. It is assent, not impulse, which determines behaviour by selecting some particular antecedent cause. How a man decides will clearly depend on his disposition, but the fact that assent *mediates* the effect of external circumstances on his actions means that *the only necessary cause* of his actions is himself. If his disposition is not governed by *orthos logos* he will not be able to make *orthos logos* the principal cause of his action. But by assenting to the truth of an external rule (*praeceptum*) and making that the antecedent cause he will perform an appropriate act (*kathekon*) and presumably improve his disposition.

<sup>53</sup>SVF 2, 979.

<sup>54</sup>See Cicero, *De Fato*, 43; Epictetus, 4, 1, 69.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.* 42-4.

<sup>56</sup>SVF 2, 351; see in general O. Rieth, *Grundbegriffe der Stoischen Ethik* (Berlin, 1933), pp. 134-155.

We have already seen that moral badness is a matter of misjudgment. The introduction of impulse and assent shows what this amounts to in practice. The characteristic of a bad disposition is its lack of independence and freedom : it permits behaviour to be determined by any cause except *orthos logos*, that is, it surrenders its self-determination to emotional judgments and external influences. Hence the Stoics define 'freedom' as 'possibility of independent action', 'knowledge of what can and cannot be done', and 'evil' is equated with 'enslavement'.<sup>57</sup> The concepts of *apatheia* and *autarkeia*, "not being affected by emotions and external events", are thus intimately related to the logical doctrine of cause and effect. It is the bad man who is completely in the power of necessity, "like a dog dragged by a cart", since he allows his behaviour to be governed directly by external events and emotions prompted by them. The good man subjects all events to judgment. Those to which he assents assist him to perform each action, but his actions are determined not by them but by himself.

## IV

This courageous emphasis on the autonomy of the moral agent is striking both for its anticipation of Kant and also for the fact that it is not limited to Aristotle's civilized Greeks. But Stoic ethics is ultimately parasitical on physics, and this, plus tendencies inherent in Greek ethics generally, produced a theory of dispositions and moral judgment which was unpalatable and unpractical. The mental/moral disposition and the physical state of the human *psyche* are one and the same.<sup>58</sup> Moral character is a matter of *pneuma*-tension :<sup>59</sup> the disposition is a function of the *logos* in the soul, and the *logos* is " *pneuma* in a certain state ".<sup>60</sup> The identification of physical and mental/moral states, perhaps assisted by the medical usage of words like *diathesis*, led the Stoics greatly (even by ancient standards) to oversimplify the complexity of moral conduct. This is one of the reasons for their strange notion that between good and bad dispositions there are no other conditions and neither admits of degrees of difference.<sup>61</sup> If goodness is explained in terms of physical quality an inflexible theory of morality is likely to result. Physical qualities tend to be definite and distinguishable, and by analogy we may be led to think that goodness is something precise and identifiable, like a particular shade of red, and any other shade falls outside (so Epictetus *Diss.* I. 2, 17-22). There is, of course, a logical difference between not-good and bad which the Stoics ignored in judgments of moral character. But their concept of a disposition as a physical state rather than a set of tendencies to act according to a certain pattern may have helped

<sup>57</sup>*SVF* 3, 355, 356. It is because every actual event requires an external, antecedent cause that all events are said to be "according to fate"; see M. Reesor, "Fate and Possibility in Early Stoic Philosophy", *Phoenix* 19 (1965), 288 f.

<sup>58</sup>Galen, *SVF* 3, 471a; Alexander Aphr. *SVF* 2, 786; Cicero, *SVF* 3, 424.

<sup>59</sup>Galen, *SVF* 3, 473.

<sup>60</sup>Sextus, *SVF* 2, 96; Alexander Aphr. *SVF* 2, 823.

<sup>61</sup>Stobaeus, *SVF* 1, 216; and in general, *SVF* 3, 524-543. The mid-way condition, "morally indifferent" (*ἀδιάφορος*), is applied not to human dispositions but to terms like health, wealth, honour, physical beauty.



them to suppose that no man could perform a right action unless he never performs a wrong one; that is, unless his situation is, say, a definite shade of red, and not any other shade. The wrong state could change into the right one, but until it was completely changed the actions of its possessor are treated as morally culpable. A man who has made such progress that he is on the point of earning the title 'good' performs actions which externally look the same as those performed by the good man.<sup>62</sup> But the former man remains vicious until his actions are based entirely on an internal state of *orthos logos* and not on external conformity to rules.<sup>63</sup> If they were based on *orthos logos* he would be a good man. The change from vice to virtue was thus regarded as sudden and instantaneous; indeed, the acquisition of this fundamentally different disposition was unnoticed by its possessor.<sup>64</sup> We are to suppose, I think, that in getting it right by instruction, rule-following, etc., he has gradually changed the tension of his soul-*pneuma* so that he suddenly begins to act by internal prompting when there is no question of his doing the good by accident or for the wrong reason. Hence good and bad are mutually exclusive. That part of the soul which can manifest virtue can also manifest vice, but if it is in the one state it cannot be in the other.<sup>65</sup> Of course, a good action cannot in the same circumstances and at the same time be a bad action, but it does not stop the agent from performing a bad action on a different occasion. The Stoics, however (and sometimes Aristotle too), seem to have argued that a disposition *x* entails the performance of exclusively *x*-type actions, and since *x* is either virtue or vice they had to explain moral improvement or deterioration (which some denied) in terms of a complete change of disposition.<sup>66</sup> One is tempted to think they made the assumption that dispositions are terms of the same logical type as particular moral acts and thus amenable to analysis by the principle of exclusive disjunction.

The second reason for treating good and evil as absolute, contradictory states is different. We know that the Stoics regarded virtue as "consistently acting in accordance with *orthos logos*".<sup>67</sup> Vice is somewhat similarly defined by Cicero as *habitus aut adfectio in tota vita inconstans et a se ipsa dissentiens*.<sup>68</sup> This definition is not precisely the contrary of the other—for the contrary would be consistently acting inconsistently with *orthos logos*—but the Stoics probably thought that this was entailed in "a disposition which is inconsistent with itself throughout life", since the natural state of the human *logos* is *orthos*. In stressing the need for consistency in moral action the

<sup>62</sup>Stobaeus, *SVF* 3, 510.

<sup>63</sup>Plutarch, *SVF* 3, 539; Sextus, *SVF* 3, 516. See also O. Lusehnat, "Das Problem des ethischen Fortschritts in der alten Stoa", *Philologus* 102 (1958), 178-214.

<sup>64</sup>See Plutarch, *De Stoic. Rep.* 19.

<sup>65</sup>Plutarch, *SVF* 3, 459.

<sup>66</sup>In general goodness, once acquired, was regarded as a permanent disposition, though Chrysippus conceded that drink and melancholy might cause it to be lost (*SVF* 3, 237). But it is probable that such loss was regarded as involuntary and temporary (cf. *SVF* 3, 238). The wise man would not get drunk deliberately, but if someone laced his drink his disposition would suffer a temporary slackening of tension and loss of "right reason".

<sup>67</sup>Stobaeus, *SVF* 3, 560.

<sup>68</sup>Cicero, *Tusc. Disp.* 4, 29.

Stoics were obviously right. A man cannot be said to have a moral principle if he regularly breaks it. And if a man has a moral principle he must believe that it *should* be applied consistently. The Stoics saw clearly that moral principles impose the obligation of consistently being applied, and that a policy of acting inconsistently with any rules cannot be a moral one. But they used 'consistency' and 'inconsistency' to distinguish not only moral and non-moral policies, but also moral and immoral dispositions.

The mark of Stoic goodness is not merely an intention or tendency to follow a policy consistently, but successful fulfilment of that policy such that any failure labels the agent *kakon*, not *agathon*. It is all or nothing, since 'to act rightly' means *always* to act in accordance with *orthos logos* and one failure is sufficient to falsify the 'always'. Having no policy or not following the right one all the time are both alike instances of inconsistency with goodness, and hence bad. A virtuous act is therefore any moral action which proceeds from an agent whose disposition is consistently concordant with *orthos logos*, and a vicious act is anything of the same category performed by an agent whose disposition falls short of such consistency. In the assessment of any moral action, the whole character comes into account.

Given their theory of dispositions and desire for rigorous consistency the Stoics could hardly avoid this conclusion. But the concept of evil which arises in consequence proves an affront both to language and experience. It is one thing to insist that the predicates applied to moral conduct should be applied only to moral conduct; that the commendation of health requires a different pro-word from the commendation of moral goodness. But to argue that 'better' and 'worse' have no moral application is to restrict moral commendation to perfection and moral blame to wickedness. The Stoics agreed that perfection has rarely, if ever, been attained by men, and were forced to conclude that for the purpose of moral judgment most men are equally culpable. What is required in a definition of virtue and vice is confused with the criterion of commendable and blameworthy dispositions. The wise man is the criterion, but he is not just an ideal. Those who fall short of his perfect consistency, which means practically all men, are unable to perform any right actions; occasional failures are judged as harshly as deliberate and consistent wrong-doers.

The Stoic concept of *kakia* belongs to a theory of ethics which raises interesting and important questions, but it contributes little to the practical analysis of moral conduct. *Kakia* is set firmly in the human sphere and shown to be quite independent of God's actions and intentions. It is caused by men's misunderstanding of their own nature and the nature of the universe, and for this misunderstanding they are culpable. Unfortunately, all men, except the rare wise man, who intuitively grasps God's purposes, are in this condition. Thus *kakos* (morally bad) turns out to be more like a factual description of normal men than a way of placing the objects we ought not to desire or pursue. In practice the Stoics were forced to supplement their precious categorical distinctions by rules for judging the conduct of daily life.

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